

Women's studies in the 1990s: Problems and prospects*

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It gives me great pleasure to be here today to talk with you about women's studies. As my title suggests I want to address the future, no doubt a hazardous undertaking for an historian. To do this, I want to briefly examine a little of the past of women's studies in the 1970s and 1980s - its objectives, its characteristics, its achievements and its limitations. The last of these - limitations - signals a second theme it seems useful for a conference like this to address. Many problems have been identified especially during the last five years, and their solution if possible will be one of our tasks across the 1990s. Some of these problems in Australia have related to the Dawkins initiatives in higher education, but others are of wider salience for women's studies in a number of western countries. They include the following:

- the relationship between women's studies as a field of knowledge and feminist scholarship within mainstream disciplines;
- the problem of women's continued under-representation as faculty staff, and as postgraduate research students;
- the curricula of women's studies - its characteristics, its allegiances and disputes with other positions, its costly exclusions with regard to race, ethnicity and Aboriginality, its generation gaps and age blindnesses;
- the institutional problems facing women's studies: to margin or mainstream - the special unit versus integration; the name 'women's studies' itself and ways the research and teaching missions of its workers can be represented; the lack of boundaries around the mission of women's studies workers in the academy; and last but not least
- the political problems confronting women's studies practitioners (or life of being attacked from all sides, friends and foes).

Many papers at this conference will be dealing in depth with these problems facing us. To address this second theme early, I shall mainly raise questions and quote from many of you present, as to how you have seen the problems over the past five years.

The final issue I want to examine, the prospects for women's studies in the 1990s and in the light of this series of as yet unresolved problems. Again the mode must be through questions and necessarily speculative - who can know the future? (I wouldn't have predicted five years ago that Queensland would today have a Labor Government for whom some of my senior men colleagues most supportive of women's studies now work.)

The prospects worth addressing include the following:

- changing faculty culture as a place for women to work
- changing the numbers and experience of women postgraduate students
- acceptance that equity for women in higher education serves national goals
- opening up the women's studies curricula
- producing constructive theoretical engagements between feminist theory and other positions
- defining a research centre for women's studies and feminist scholarship
- ending the pursuit of purity by feminist intellectuals in favour of the political pluralities that will be necessary for women's

studies to survive into the next century.

I will conclude by briefly examining some of these prospects.

Women's studies: the discourse

What is women's studies? This is a question journalists and Vice-Chancellors and parents of students often ask with a faint air of quizzical bemusement. The answers almost never entirely displace this air. The answers have changed however. In writing of the 1970s the women's studies project was defined in terms of compensating women as a group from their omission or misrepresentation in knowledges, politics and culture. A fundamental axiom was that women constituted a unified group with a common experience, unjustifiably excluded from the canon of human experiences, as exhibited or advanced in literature, art, music, history, philosophy and the social sciences. The basis or locale of women's studies was arts/humanities and the social sciences, and its practitioners had little to say about knowledges such as physics, economics, business, computer science, and the disciplines forming the learned professions. If women traditionally 'chose' arts/humanities/education/health, for which current federal higher education policy rebukes them, it was these traditional areas that received the main onslaught of critical attention and creative curriculum innovation in the 1980s.

As the 1980s literature on women's studies showed, things were changing. It was still possible to find directives by the mid 1980s to women's studies practitioners:

*to find, reclaim and rename ourselves; ...to create women-centred knowledges; ...to search for the origins of women's oppression...to empower individual women while making them aware of their obligations and accountability to women as a social group.*¹

But many of those involved in feminist scholarship would no longer have seen the project in quite these terms. Several changes are pertinent. The critique of dichotomous western thought by feminist philosophers and social theorists like Nancy Jay, Genevieve Lloyd, Mia Campioni, Elizabeth Grosz, and Moira Gatens called into question the theory vs practice dichotomy². This recast the meaning of women's studies and feminist work inside the academy. Knowledges were proving quite intractable to feminist critique, as feminist academics struggled in great difficulty to secure tenured permanent employment in a context in which nationally women were 12-17% of faculty staff. In short, feminists began to see that much was at stake in the men's club character of knowledges and knowledge institutions. Far from a simple resource that had been maldistributed due to sexism, remediable by adding women, knowledge was increasingly redefined as itself a site of complex sexual politics struggles.

In this context the issue became less women's studies (inside) relation to the real struggle - the women's movement (outside) - the former accountable to the latter, than recognising universities and colleges as themselves key places for feminist transformation. This permitted the possibility that all aspects of feminist struggle did not move together, identically, in some seamless unity. Women's studies ceased to be posed as servant of the women's movement. Rather it became recognised as part of it. And, with the acknowledgement of the political importance of knowledges which influenced the lives and options of millions of people, the

feminist stakes in transforming knowledges became high indeed.

Duly, the objectives of women's studies diversified, often according to local needs and institutional specificities. As Louise Johnson observed in 1987, the academy is not a monolith and its many contradictions create many avenues for feminist activity³. Objectives shifted in many cases from adding women to existing frameworks to questioning and reconstituting frameworks entirely - with an increased focus on problematising men, masculinity, the male body. And in a new spirit of confidence built on twenty years of new knowledge and teaching, feminists working within and around women's studies, put feminism itself under sharp scrutiny - disclosing many problems, of which more shortly. That twenty years had, in the United States, led to a transcontinental proliferation of courses, programmes, research centres and publishing, mirrored to a lesser extent in other western countries. Practitioners could be satisfied too that women's studies research had helped to change public policy,

*especially over the issues of rape, incest, pregnancy, female-headed families and the relation of work and family life. In each issue research uncovered a problem more serious than people assumed.*⁴

Observing its achievements, Catharine R Stimpson sounded a note of cautious optimism about the prospects of women's studies. In 1986 she wrote

*Women's studies...like the contemporary reconstruction of gender relations is underway. It has surpassed its origins. It may not yet have achieved as full a public understanding of its purpose and capabilities, its growth and significance, but its direction is clear-towards nothing less than a new architecture of consciousness and culture.*⁵

Some problems for the 1990s

Australian practitioners of women's studies in the 1990s may be less sanguine about the situation here than Stimpson's reading of the mid 1980s. The series of problems I introduced earlier are worth some brief elaboration.

Dawkins' Revolution

Most commentators agree that, despite some considerable overall merits, the so-called 'Dawkins revolution' has disadvantaged further the already embattled areas of arts, humanities and social sciences. A context with the buzz words of economically defined 'national goals' with a related stress on 'efficiency' has tended to be read by senior executives in higher education as looking ill for women's studies, located at the bottom of the humanities heap - meta-useless, non-vocational. True, there is a stated commitment to 'equity' for women. Closer examination shows funding parsimony compared with funds available for the pursuit of other national goals, and frequently the goal of equity is subordinated to, or else to be measured by the degree of success in relocating women undergraduates in the much lauded 'non-traditional' areas of science, computing, business and engineering. Women pursuing women's studies then, is hardly rated high in federal policy. The inferences for institutional outcomes seem brutally clear.

Women's studies and feminist scholarship

Another problem faces women's studies in the form of staff patterns. More than half of the institutions comprising the unified national system have women's studies courses in some form. But securing tenurable faculty staff for them has been less certain. Where they have been obtained they are often joint appointments attached also to disciplinary departments. The other common pattern in Australian universities is that of staff appointed elsewhere buying out time or being seconded to teach women's studies courses temporarily (or in the least favourable cases, fully-committed discipline-based women faculty staff are teaching a share of women's studies courses on top of their normal loads). Some universities have two appointments specifically to

teach women's studies but what this means depends greatly on student numbers, the scale of administrative demands on their time and the extent of the availability of other willing and appropriate qualified faculty in disciplines to work in women's studies teaching teams. So, although we are far from knowing the exact nuances of the nationwide position, two points can probably safely be made:

1. Women's studies staff around the country are the worst correspondents, reviewers, returners of calls of any faculty I know (and I include myself here) because they spend life running. They are an exhausted, often demoralised, occasionally bitchy and frustrated bunch who typically dream of having a research day now and then, for whom bulk meetings blur into one another. Lovers, friends, colleagues, families and neighbours people a background landscape too often like ships in the night. And again to paraphrase Louise Johnson, everyday can be a struggle to defend, to stand on the spot. The teaching is the easy part.

2. The majority of teachers, tutors and assessors of work in interdisciplinary women's studies courses in any year in this country are not 'career women's studies' staff but are feminist practitioners employed within of single disciplines or departments. This can be occasion of fruitful reciprocal flow not only of women's studies perspectives back to the disciplines but also vice versa. Yet, on the ground, disparate conflicts of interests can erupt over curriculum, theoretical paradigms, the importance of developments in one discipline compared with another, and matters of terminology, mode and style. Feminist scholars working to transform disciplines can be heard to accuse interdisciplinary women's studies colleagues of mindless eclecticism, superficiality, lack of rigour and time lag in catching onto crucial changes, especially in debates among feminist scholars within key disciplines. Alternatively, interdisciplinary women's studies workers may be heard classifying their discipline-located sisters as narrowly disciplinary, elitist, monovocal and monovisioned, petty, unable to see the larger issues, the phallogocentric knowledge forests for the trees of individual disciplines, hence useless in problem-oriented, broad ranging courses. I here only scratch the surface of problems that can arise - I wish merely to signal the 'down side' that can accompany prevalent staffing patterns.

Women's studies curricula

The problem of staffing patterns has consequences for women's studies curricula. Design is hard and uncertain work, compounded by difficulties of team process and the rapidly changing state of debate within feminism. Teresa de Lauretis wrote recently that by the turn of the 1980s feminist theory had emerged as a distinct field, from earlier claims of being merely an adjectival position as 'feminist critique' of this or that. It became possible as a distinct field in a 'post colonial mode' and moment 'when certain writings by women of colour and lesbians explicitly constituted themselves as a feminist critique of feminism'⁶.

Earlier certainties of feminist curricula are still resonating from the critique of essentialism within feminism - the attribution and celebration of fixed innate qualities to women - by which singular unities around 'sex' were attacked (but de Lauretis notes, not those unities organised by critics of white heterosexual feminists around race, ethnicity and sexual identity). This 'essentialism' of 'woman' has led to costly exclusions in the women's studies curriculum, drastically criticised in the names of race, aboriginality, ethnicity, sexual identities, postmodernism and poststructuralism. Most recently these critics have in turn attracted their critics (of which more towards shortly) but the curricula implications of heated debates in feminist theory remain unevenly appreciated.

Institutional problems

I'll skip over these quickly since they have been well covered in previous work.

- Should women's studies occupy a distinct margin or unit, or

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aim for a mainstream or integrated position? Both models exist around Australia. Both have strengths and limitations.

- Women's studies too often has a down graded place within faculty culture. It is to be seen in corridor politics, treatment of women's studies undergraduates and postgraduates by one's colleagues, and the styles of rivalry, contempt and disrespect that can accompany the quest for resources.

- Is women's studies a discipline, a field, a strategy or a nominal umbrella? Sue Sheridan has warned us against viewing it as a rival discipline it seems for good reasons⁷. What are the advantages and risks of refusing the definition of discipline and the identity of coherent department 'like any other'?

- Women's studies is inadequately recognised (even identified) in existing categories used by funding bodies upon which humanities, social sciences research heavily depend. This raises the difficult question of what the research mission of the field of women's studies should be.

- There is a problem of accreditation and competences - in the area of women's studies. There have been worrying assertions as to who is to be deemed competent to judge the worth of applicants and curricula made by all sorts of people I refer you here to an article by my colleague Chilla Bulbeck on the controversy on this issue at Griffith University in 1985⁸.

Political problems

Mary Evans wrote in 1982 of the problem of women's studies being denounced by academy as biased and illegitimate - by women's movement for being too rarefied and inaccessible to ordinary women⁹. Alternatively, as Naomi Schor reported of Jacques Derrida's 1988 visit to Pembroke Centre for Women's Studies, criticism can take another form, derived from avant-garde intellectual politics dominated by male masters. In his paper, 'Women in the Beehive', Derrida criticised women's studies for being accommodated in the academy - domesticated, with its cutting edge, blunted¹⁰. Stimpson too, observed that, in some areas of women's studies, funding and publishing what was 'faddish' in the 1970s, was 'passe' in the 1980s¹¹. Mortgaged to the essentialist categories of women and sexual difference, is women's studies doomed to be 'daggy', humanist, modernist to a younger generation of self proclaimed post-feminists (whose texts are eagerly awaited)?

This has been by no means a comprehensive listing of problems identified for women's studies during the past five years. I want to conclude with some suggestions on prospects for solving them and on possible futures for this exciting field of work.

Prospects

Changing faculty culture

Many of the problems confronting women's studies concern the activity and status of theorising, the representation and locating of sexual difference and the practical problems arising from reidentifying institutional knowledge, patterns and practices as political. It is difficult to tackle them without simultaneously challenging the culture of university faculties and schools, seeking their transformation so that they can provide reasonable sites for attempted solutions. And it is not only the 'non-traditional' areas that require challenge. Humanities enrolments are three-quarters female at undergraduate level but only a third overall at postgraduate level. Their education is supplied by faculty staff, three-quarters of whom are men. The experience of masculinist faculty culture undoubtedly repels women humanities graduates, especially early in the life cycle. With few enlisting in doctorates (and high attrition amongst the small group who do) we see the consequences in stark simplicity. Few appropriately qualified women can be found to apply for any given faculty staff position, and so the sex asymmetry of humanities faculty staff patterns is maintained. Young women see that the knowledge makers are

overwhelmingly men. Mainstream undergraduate course cultures then become sexual cultures with measurable patterns and outcomes. An important mission of women's studies is to invert logic of the DEET Policy Document 'A Fair Chance for All', written in large part as if women (irrational, unformed) are the problem and not the sexual culture of the university.

The chosen objectives of that document for women are:

- to have 40% of enrolment in 'non-traditional' undergraduate areas female by 1995;

- to have female engineering enrolments up from 7% to 15% by the same date; and

- to have women in research-based higher degrees mirror their undergraduate proportions. Let us be quite clear - that means a jump from 34% to 75% in five years in the humanities and social sciences. The first two of these objectives focus upon relocating women in the system and repudiating their existing preferences. These look perilously close to a contempt for the feminine and applause for the masculine as they currently prevail, all in the name of economic rationalism.

As women's studies teachers and practitioners we can do a great deal to disrupt usefully this demand that women simply imitate men's educational biography:

- We should demand that each institution fund research to account for its failure to mentor representative portions of women into honours and higher degree study across all fields.

- We should have our institutions develop staff development programs, to train male majority of staff about disciplinary masculinism. Who better to retrain them than us, for a fee. When science or engineering can show progressive change, women might enrol in them. This would really serve national objectives.

- Women's studies at graduate level can be an important route for women graduates into research-based higher degrees. MA coursework research training could be designed to serve as conduit into areas of 'national priorities'. At least thereby, critically trained women would be placed to challenge where necessary the problematic of these priorities.

There is plenty of scope to use current rhetoric in government policy against those aspects of higher education that are oppressive to women. This is nowhere clearer than in the equity-efficiency link up, especially if we enlarge prevailing notions of 'efficiency'. The documents represent women as an 'untapped pool of national resources' - rather like a Bass Strait oil well. The viewer of this waste is the male nation - rational, efficient, immersed in non-traditional areas.

Asked from the point of view of the 'other' of western dichotomies, which, as Anna Yeatman argues in a recent article, feminism and other postmodern movements make permissible, the question and its linkups could be recast¹². It is the University, paid for by the direct taxes of the underrepresented of Australia's sexes that is the wasted pool of national resources. Women's studies is in the perfect position to identify and expose the phallogocentrism of university culture and to propose and execute efficient solutions. Unevenly this is already beginning to happen, and many of you are currently working hard at it.

The long term implications of changing faculty culture and enlarging the pool of women postgraduates (hence women qualified for faculty positions), would be an institution more accountable to women, more inclusive of them, in which constructive women's studies debate could safely flourish on the key topics of the curricula and on theoretical and political engagements with other positions. These topics are incredibly important but are arguably taking place in very cramped and embattled circumstances.

Debates of particular importance are underway for the 1990s and will resound especially around the cluster of postmodernism, feminism, race and the problem of essentialism. In addition, the relationship between women's studies and women's policy will loom large in cross-institutional debate. Some recent contribu-

tions by Anna Yeatman, Sneja Gunew, bell hooks, Teresa de Lauretis, Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Grosz on some of these themes provide important indicators of the contours of the challenge to women's studies entailed by such debates. They merit some brief mention in this context.

Yeatman rightly observes that postmodernism challenges feminism to give up the modernist meta-narratives and general theories universalised from specifically western positions. She cites feminist theories of the sexual division of labour, Rosaldo's public/private sphere dualism and Chodorow's object relations theory of the reproduction of mothering as examples of feminist complicity in modernism, imperialism and racism¹³. Meanwhile in a useful discussion of racism and feminism on a recent *Coming Out Show*, Sneja Gunew makes the important point that white feminists dealing with changes of racism and related criticism from Aboriginal and ethnic women was not a matter simply solved by 'inclusion', any more than 'adding women and stirring' and had altered the fundamental phallogocentrism of western knowledges. To assemble a new data on yet another 'other' out there simply reproduces old problems. Instead, for Gunew, appropriate responses will involve 'specifying your own position - the dominant white group is after all a race and bundle of ethnicities'. She and others engaged in that discussion suggested that the more critical political priority must be the process of deconstructing one's own (white) position in dialogue with others working out theirs, so that the mention of race in 'metropolitan' west is as much about white dominant femininities as 'others'¹⁴.

In reference to the conflict of interests and loyalties that has led many black women to repudiate the category feminism, bell hooks said of her experience. 'I don't want to give up term feminism in favour of other terms, because of the risk of self-marginalisation of black women from global struggle against sexism - Black women have much more to offer this movement than knowing about race'¹⁵. Alluding to that 'much more' had led feminists to challenge the way race and ethnicity are simply added to the cocktail. De Lauretis is particularly critical of the tendency in Anglo-American feminist discussion to assemble 'race' as a parallel layer of co-equal status with axis of gender. This does not grasp their constant mutual implication, for 'the experience of gender is itself shaped by race relations and that must be the case however different the outcome for all women'¹⁶.

The location of race in feminist discourse highlights the vexed status of fixed categories and identities, especially for postmodernist and anti-humanist critics. If differences among women fuelled a decade of intense debate within feminism over 'essentialism', it is interesting that key players like de Lauretis, Schor and Grosz are now reconsidering the consequences. De Lauretis is worried by the Anglo-American obsession with typologies of classification within feminist theory. She contends that her 'quarrel is with the reductive opposition...of a lumpen feminist essentialism to a phantom feminist post-structuralism (critical-socialist-psychoanalytic and Franco-British)...'¹⁷. Schor develops this reservation in much more polemical terms.

What revisionism...was to Marxist Leninism essentialism, is to feminism: the prime idiom of intellectual terrorism and the privileged instrument of political orthodoxy borrowed from the time honoured vocabulary of philosophy, the word essentialism has been endowed within feminism with the power to reduce to silence, to excommunicate, to consign to oblivion. Essentialism in modern day feminism is anathema. There are signs however of a recognition of the excesses perpetrated in the name of anti essentialism, of the urgency of rethinking the very terms of a conflict which all parties would agree has ceased to be productive...Anti essentialism operates by essentialising essentialism, by proceeding as if there were on essentialism, an essence of essentialism. If we are to move beyond increasingly sterile conflict over essentialism, we must begin by de-essentialising essentialism, for no more than deconstruction essentialism is not one. The multiplicity of essentialism - one might for example want to distinguish French

*essentialism from the naive variety, naive essentialism from strategic essentialism, heterosexual from homosexual is...revealed by the multiplicity of its critiques: for just as the pressing issues of race and ethnicity are forcing certain anti essentialists to question their assertion of a female essence that is widely perceived and rightly denounced by minority women as exclusionary.*¹⁸

These debates have important consequences for women's studies, teaching and research objectives. They will not await the arduous process of policy and institutional changes women's studies will make across the 1990s. There is no 'after the revolution' here and no very useful split to maintain between theory and practice. The institutional changes pursued must be informed by these debates since they inflect objective demands. Equally, the debates need ongoing acquaintance with institutional and political struggles and constraints facing women. But as Schor concludes

*Women's studies always involved a radical questioning of the conditions of the production and dissemination of knowledge, of the constitution of the disciplines, of the hierarchical ordering of faculties within the institution...[W]omen's studies can never be just another cell in the academic beehive.*¹⁹

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